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ABSTRACT

The planning of conferences that are accessible to people with disabilities involves focusing on the accessibility of all aspects of the meeting, including choosing a site, promotion, registration, presentations, and handouts. Any meetings and facilities that are open to the public must comply with the provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, which calls for reasonable modifications to avoid discrimination in policies, practices, and procedures. Special site accessibility needs of individuals with mobility impairments, visual impairments, and hearing impairments should be considered. Promotional material should be available in formats other than print. Registration forms should ask whether any special assistance is needed. Conference presentations should be examined in terms of the needs of individuals with visual impairments, hearing impairments, or other disabilities. Techniques are outlined for accommodating participants in cases where accommodations necessary for one person conflict with the needs of another. Contains 11 references. (JDD)

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON DISABILITIES AND GIFTED EDUCATION

ERIC/OSEP SPECIAL PROJECT

ED 369 242

PLANNING ACCESSIBLE CONFERENCES AND MEETINGS AN ERIC/OSEP INFORMATION BRIEF FOR CONFERENCE PLANNERS

Planning conferences that are accessible to people with disabilities involves focusing on the accessibility of *all* aspects of your meeting, from choosing a site through promotion, registration, presentations, and handouts. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) provides to individuals with disabilities the same civil rights protections that apply to race, sex, national origin, and religion. Consequently, any meetings that are open to the public must comply with the provisions of the Act. Furthermore, if the conference site is a public facility such as a hotel, it must also comply with the ADA.

Title III of the ADA stipulates that public facilities must make reasonable modifications to avoid discrimination in their policies, practices and procedures. It requires private establishments that are used by the general public to be accessible to people with disabilities who are customers, visitors, employees, or clients. Title III does not require accommodations that result in an undue burden or that represent a fundamental alteration in the nature of the goods or services provided. Goods and services must be provided in an integrated setting, unless separate or different measures are necessary to ensure equal opportunity. The law states that all modifications to existing structures must be "readily achievable." Examples of modifying a site to make it accessible to a person in a wheelchair include making doors wide enough and assuring that the main entry and exit routes of the facility are easily maneuverable and obstacle free. Other easily achievable alterations include providing ramps to elevated areas, providing accessible signage through height modification and through raised lettering or braille, and providing professional, qualified sign language interpreters.

CHOOSING AN ACCESSIBLE SITE

When choosing a site for a meeting or conference, the meeting planner or a local representative will need to visit the hotel or conference center to determine whether or not any barriers to accessibility exist. The site visit must include checking entrance and interior doorways, parking lots, corridors and aisles, stairways, elevators, sleeping rooms (if needed), meeting rooms, restrooms, dining facilities, telephones, water fountains, temperature controls, light and emergency controls, and the fitness center or health club. In addition, the accessibility of any outside entertainment and transportation services offered to participants must be checked. For all participants, the time necessary to move from one session to another must be considered and allowed for in the agenda. For example, do participants have to change floors to get to lunch or to the next session? Are the distance and route between meeting rooms traversable for all? Many of the publications included in the bibliography, such as *Accommodating All Guests: The Americans with Disabilities Act and the Lodging Industry*, and *Making Your Association Accessible: A "How To" Guide*, provide checklists and specific dimensions to check for when the site visit is conducted.

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The staff of the hotel or conference center must be educated about issues of accessibility. The conference planner should provide the site staff with as much information as possible about individuals with disabilities.

The goal of the conference planner is to select a conference setting that allows a person with a disability to move about the conference site freely and independently and participate in and benefit from the conference program. To achieve this goal, the following points should be considered during the site visit.

Site Accessibility Considerations for Individuals with Mobility Impairments

The following accommodations should be provided for individuals with mobility impairments, including those using wheelchairs, crutches, canes, or walkers:

- Accessibility of main entrances to the site.
- Doorways wide enough to accommodate wheelchairs and three-wheel carts of varying sizes.
- Capability of the site to provide appropriately graded ramping in inaccessible areas (including meeting rooms, dining, and lounge areas).
- Wide spaces, corridors, and aisles.
- Level surfaces.
- Accessible restrooms (including wide doors, unobstructed sinks of appropriate height, large stalls, grab bars, adequate space in which to maneuver a wheelchair, and controls and equipment easily operated from a sitting position).
- Public telephones at accessible height.
- Adequate space for wheelchairs in meeting rooms, at conference and banquet tables with all the participants, not on the outskirts.
- Wheelchair accessible registration table.
- Accessible electrical outlets and closet rods of appropriate height in guest rooms.

Site Accessibility Considerations for Individuals with Visual Impairments

The following accommodations should be provided for individuals who are partially sighted or blind:

- Well-lit areas, adjustable lighting.
- Obstacle-free environment (i.e., free of protruding objects that cannot be detected easily).
- Large, tactile directions for equipment, elevators, and restrooms; elevator numbers written in braille or raised print.
- Dog runs in the hotel or convention center (or an area near the outside entrance) for dog guide users.
- Appropriate accommodations in guest rooms.

Site Accessibility Considerations for Individuals with Hearing Impairments

The following accommodations should be provided for individuals who are hard of hearing or who are deaf:

- Guest rooms equipped with alternative emergency devices such as visual alarms and indicators, (e.g., flashing lights on doors, telephones, and as fire alarms), vibrating beds, volume-controlled phone lines, and close-captioned television.
- An available TDD (telecommunication device for the deaf).
- Dog runs in the hotel or convention center (or an area near the outside entrance) for hearing-dog users.

PROMOTION AND REGISTRATION

Conference planners should arrange for all promotional material to be available in alternative formats, such as braille or computer disk. Include photographs of individuals with disabilities in the promotional material; this illustrates a commitment to assuring all participants an accessible conference.

In all conference material, make participants aware that accommodations can be made for a variety of needs. The registration form must ask whether any special assistance is needed. Examples include statements such as the following:

> If you have a disability and require special assistance, please inform *(conference planner)* by attaching your requirements to this form or call *(conference planner.)*
>
> If you have a disability and may require accommodation in order to fully participate in this activity, please check here. You will be contacted by someone from our staff to discuss your specific needs (Jarrow, 1992).

A more detailed registration form requesting information on specific disabilities and needs can also be used. If a more general statement such as the one above is included, staff responding to special assistance requests should be prepared to ask detailed questions regarding necessary accommodations.

Designate someone on staff to handle all issues concerning accommodations for participants with disabilities during the meeting. Have this person available to assist in room registration and site orientation.

SOCIAL FUNCTIONS AND MEALS

When planning social functions and meals, meeting planners should:

- Include personal assistants and interpreters in the estimated number of participants.
- Make adequate provisions for seating, allowing all participants to sit in the same area. Do not place persons in wheelchairs, or those who use walkers or dog guides on the fringes of the dining area.
- Avoid buffet lines; they can be particularly difficult for persons with mobility or visual impairments.

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

The meeting planner must work with invited speakers and presenters to ensure presentations that are accessible to persons with disabilities. Attention to the following points will enhance the accessibility of conference presentations.

Accessible Presentations for all Participants with Disabilities

- Choose well-lit and easily accessible meeting rooms.
- Control background noise to the greatest extent possible.
- Choose a meeting room with good acoustics and an auxiliary sound system, if possible.
- Provide written materials (handouts, overheads, etc.) disseminated at the meeting in a variety of formats, such as raised print, large print, braille,

audio cassette, and computer disks.

- Discuss with each presenter, prior to the meeting, the importance of developing a presentation that will be accessible to all participants.

- Instruct the presenter(s) to include only the key points of the presentation on overheads or slides. Be sure they are completely legible, with large print and *sharp*, contrasting colors. In addition, ask the presenter(s) to limit the number of overheads or other visual aids used in the presentation and to allow adequate time for the audience to read the visual aids.

- Ask the speaker(s) to accompany conference materials, including presentations and handouts, with a complete verbal description. If slides, overheads, videos, or other visual aids are used, the speaker must describe them orally. Ask presenter(s) to provide a copy of presentation materials well in advance to allow for large print or braille transcription.

- Instruct the presenter(s) to speak in well-paced and well-modulated tones. It is particularly important for presenters to monitor their rate of speech and not speak too rapidly. At the beginning of the presentation, tell participants with disabilities that notes will be available in appropriate formats.

- Check for the special needs of presenters with disabilities. Special needs may include ramping or podium requests, a reverse interpreter, an orientation and mobility specialist, or guide for a person with limited vision.

The following issues are particularly relevant to the accessibility of presentations for persons with visual impairments or those who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Accessible Presentations for Individuals with Visual Impairments*

- Meet with participants who have visual impairments and show them the site by explaining the layout, identifying the location of amenities and exits, and walking through the meeting area with them. Help them to find seating in the meeting room.

- Provide oral descriptions of meeting room layouts, emergency exit locations, and amenities prior to the beginning of the presentation,

- Allow access to front row seats during meeting sessions.

* (Note. The items listed in this section may also increase the accessibility for sighted individuals with reading or learning disabilities.)

- Have a staff member or volunteer available to sit with the participant and describe the presentations, if the participant so desires.

- Offer papers, agendas, or other materials in alternative formats. Options include large print, braille, tape recordings, and computer disks in ASCII format. Print materials can be transcribed in braille through contracting with outside agencies or by purchasing the necessary computer hardware and software programs. If the session is to be taped, the master tape must be made on good quality tape. A verbal listing of contents should be included at the front of each tape. One other option is to have reader(s) available for participant(s) with visual disabilities.

- Have photocopies of transparencies or slides available at the registration area for close examination; some audiovisual materials may not be amenable to verbal description.

- Design all exhibits so that they may be touched and/or heard. Always provide an alternative to solely visual exhibits.

- Check for adjustable lighting in the meeting room; this is particularly important for the individual with low vision. Lowering the ceiling lights can increase the contrast--and thus the visibility--of audiovisual materials. However, moving from a brightly lit vestibule to a darkened room can cause temporary disorientation. Ask the participant whether a sighted guide would be helpful.

- Use sharply contrasting colors and large print for materials, maps, books, signs, menus, forms, and displays. All materials should be available in large or raised print or in braille.

- Caution presenter(s) against relying solely on oral presentations and gestures to illustrate a point, or using visual points of reference (e.g., "here" or "there.")

Accessible Presentations for Individuals who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

- Allow for preferred seating, usually in front of the speaker and interpreter. (Preferred seating should also be away from heating and air conditioning units, hallways, and other "noisy" areas.)

- Keep lights bright in the area where the presenter and interpreter stand.

- Check that window coverings are adjustable to reduce or remove glare.

- Arrange seats in a circle for smaller discussion groups.

- Provide copies of material presented orally in written form or on diskette. Work with the presenter(s) prior to the meeting to allow for these accommodations.

- Have notes on the presentation available beforehand, if at all possible. Alternatively, have a staff member or volunteer available to take notes during the presentation, allowing the participant to focus on the speaker and interpreter.

- Arrange for qualified, professional interpreters, trained in the preferred communication style, for example, American Sign Language, Signed English, or Cued-Speech. Use a local or national agency or organization to obtain interpreters.

- Investigate the possibility of real-time captioning for large group meetings.

- Arrange for an adequate number of interpreters for meetings, meals, and social events. At least two interpreters must be available for any meeting longer than two hours. Have an additional interpreter available for registration.

Accommodating Participants with Differing Disabilities

In the event that there are conference participants with both visual and hearing impairments, accommodations necessary for one person may conflict with the needs of another. For example, presenters using overheads usually request that the lights be dimmed in the room, making it difficult for a person who is hard of hearing to see the interpreter in the dim light. However, if the lights are raised, individuals with visual impairments may have difficulty seeing the overheads because the contrast is decreased by the bright lighting. Therefore, it is *particularly* important to consult with persons with visual impairments and those who are deaf or hard of hearing *before* visual aids are used or the lighting level in the room is brightened or dimmed.

The meeting planner is responsible for accommodating each individual to the maximum extent possible. Jane E. Jarrow, Executive Director of the Association on Higher Education and Disability, suggests dimming the overhead lights and putting a spotlight on the interpreter, thereby maintaining enough contrast for the person with limited vision while still providing light on the interpreter. Before the meeting, the planner should confirm with the hotel that spotlights are available.

As previously mentioned, the conference planner should be prepared to orient and sensitize the staff at the conference site to the needs of all participants with disabilities. Several meetings and preconference site visits may be necessary; however, with continued communication and education, the goal of accessible, barrier-free conferences and meetings for all individuals will be achieved.

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